





SLAY THE DRAGON

WRITING

GREAT VIDEO GAMES

Robert Denton Bryant & Keith Giglio



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Foreword

by Larry Hryb, Xbox Live's "Major Nelson"

VIDEO GAMES are big business. As you will soon learn (if you don't know already) the video game industry is HUGE. When I tell people that the industry I work in is a BILLION dollar business—they are amazed. I then follow up with another factoid: It's bigger than Hollywood. That's right. At only 44 years old, sales of the video game industry regularly eclipse the 125-year-old motion picture industry.

Yeah. That big.

While I've always been "into" video games—from that first time I played *Pong* at the local Sears department store on their "Video Arcade" system (just a re-branded version of the venerable Atari 2600) to the countless hours spent after school at friends' houses playing *NFL Football* on Intellivision—which was really nothing more than a series of dots on a screen. We had to IMAGINE that they were QBs, linebackers, etc. Hours and hours pushing dots around the screen with our hands and our imaginations.

I attended the Newhouse School of Communications at Syracuse University to study television, radio, and film production. There, I learned about traditional story development and using technology to bring ideas and characters to life: Write a script, go to the studio and shoot it with very expensive (tube) cameras, VTRs, etc. I practiced the art of storytelling, character arc, and all the hallmarks that make for a good linear story and program. I would study that by day, and return to my dorm in the evening and play video games. (It was upstate New York. What else was a nerd to do in the winter?) I could FEEL the creative and technical fields were on a crash course in gaming.

One day we would have video games with the fidelity of movies and TV. One day there would be far away worlds we could explore for hours on end.

Fortunately, we did not have to wait too long.

I started working on the Xbox team in late 2003—when we were deep into planning "Xenon," the console that would become the Xbox 360. I was working on the "platform" (the systems that games run on) with some of the smartest people I have ever worked with: software developers, testers, network engineers, hardware engineers, and more. ALL incredibly smart and talented, but VASTLY different from the creative environment I studied in and was used to. These men and women WERE the left brain. I was used to the warm, fuzzy, vague, right-brain way of thinking—but that was *not* what this was. I learned to measure, analyze, and make data-driven decisions, not just ones that "felt right."

I also got my first look into game development.

The next building over from where I worked was a studio named Bungie that Microsoft had purchased a few years earlier. They were working on *Halo 2*, a follow-up to their massively successful game *Halo* for the original Xbox. I would often go over there for meetings and I noticed something: The lines between technical and creative were just not there. It was one team of about one hundred people in a huge U-shaped room who were all creative *and* technical, sitting next to each other and coming up with creative ideas and making them "real" with computer code. Right before my eyes I saw something amazing: The two disciplines were working closely together to create that magical world I dreamt of years before while at Syracuse.

But, it was slightly different. As this book will show you, television, films, and radio are linear storytelling. The viewer (or listener) passively sits back and watches (or listens) to the story play out at a prescribed pace and with deliberately chosen camera angles and movements. In video games, it's completely different. The players are at the center of the action. THEY decide when and where to move, look, and take action. They can spend ten minutes in a hallway. Or ten seconds. The players can open this door, then that door, then go out this window. Or they can just go out another window. Maybe they turn around and go around the building. The pace and direction are entirely up to the players. This

non-linear interactive storytelling is one of the many innovations that video games have created.

The book you are holding in your hands is for anyone who wants to learn about this new way of storytelling that really is an evolution of traditional storytelling. If you've written a screenplay—this book is for you. If you've ever played a video game and thought, “Hey, I have a great idea for a story”—this book is for you. If you want to get a better understanding of the multi-billion-dollar industry that is now a massive cultural and economic force—this book is for you.

I love video games. I love that a person playing a game can create stories and character connections with deep emotions that can be greater than movies. When I played *Red Dead Redemption*—an incredibly popular open-world game set in the great American West in the late 1800s—at the end I cried.

My wife walked into the room when I finished the game and she asked, “What's wrong?” All I could muster up was the ability to point at the screen and say “It's over. It's finally over.”

We've all felt a little something at the ending of a good book or a movie, but this felt deeper. It was MY character I was controlling. I was the one that made the story go forward at my pace. I got to know the main character, John Marston, so well because I was controlling him. In many ways, I became John Marston. Especially after the countless hours of gameplay and story decisions I had made. When I got to the end it was overwhelming. (I won't spoil it for you but if you finished the game, you probably had the same experience.)

In linear storytelling, the story and character arcs are straightforward and the ending is the same for everyone, and in video games that can often be the case. But it becomes much more personal, since in video games you actually control the character and pace of the story.

Video games often allow the player to control the *direction* of the narrative, and in some games the outcome is directly based on in-game choices you, the player, have made. Video games can employ some extremely sophisticated storytelling where three different people

playing the same game can have three different experiences and results based on their own in-game decisions. Very powerful stuff.

This book will show you what a game is and explore story and game genre, plot, character development, and much, much more. In my years of working in the industry this is the closest thing to a bible of creative video game story creation as I have ever seen. This is an amazing industry that I am proud to be a part of where you really can make your own real life adventure. Anything can happen. I love telling my old Syracuse classmates that I came to Microsoft and I was part of a team that won not one, but THREE Emmy Awards. A real life Emmy Award for working in the video game industry. That's how far we've come. (Kudos to the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences for recognizing the importance and power of video game technology.)

Enjoy this book. Enjoy the journey of creating your stories and characters and making them come to life in a game for players around the world to (hopefully) enjoy.

I hope we get to meet someday and you can tell me about your own wonder and successes in the industry.

All the best,

Larry Hryb

Twitter: @majornelson

Seattle, Washington

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CHAPTER 00

LOADING . . .

When Desmond Miles is kidnapped by a sinister corporation, they use a machine to send his consciousness back in time, where he is forced to re-live the adventures of his ancestors—a secret society of assassins. Can Desmond survive and stop the evil company’s plans to change history?

After his airplane crashes in the middle of the Atlantic, Jack discovers a man-made underwater Utopia called “Rapture.” But the city has gone mad: its gene-splicing-addicted citizens attack him, monstrous “Big Daddies” try to kill him on sight, and Rapture’s autocratic founder will stop at nothing to maintain control. Can Jack escape to the surface before he becomes an unwitting pawn in this sub-marine madhouse?

After landing on a gargantuan, ring-shaped planet, the Master Chief, a genetically enhanced super-soldier, must battle a fanatical civilization known as the Covenant. Can he stop them before they can use their super weapon to destroy all life in the galaxy?

DO THESE BLURBS sound like the plots of Hollywood’s upcoming summer blockbusters? They easily could be. Each of these story lines forms the basis of a multi-million-dollar franchise with a global audience, shelves full of licensed merchandise, legions of cosplaying fans, and side-stories in multiple media.

But these are NOT the plots of movies coming to a theater near you (not at the time of this writing, anyway, although *Halo: Nightfall* is a TV series). These are the story lines, worlds, and characters of blockbuster video games: *Assassin's Creed*, *BioShock*, and *Halo*. They are huge franchises born from video game stories. These games are interactive narratives that take place in very rich worlds populated with involving characters that inspire players to continue to interact and explore even after they've "beat the game." Video game stories and characters—their intellectual property (or "IP")—are the next great frontier of our collective pop culture imagination. Video games have finally come of age. Great stories are being told.

We've only mentioned three so far, but you can probably name many more: *Call of Duty*, *Borderlands*, *Resident Evil*, *Metal Gear Solid*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Final Fantasy*, and *God of War*.

Does that list seem too hardcore?

Let's not forget the billions of dollars amassed by such family-friendly game franchises as *Skylanders*, *Angry Birds*, *Plants vs. Zombies*, *Professor Layton*, *Ratchet & Clank*, and *Clash of Clans*. That list goes on and on as well.

Where did this all start? When did games become more than games and a place where great stories might be told? Just as the movies can be traced back to the success of a lovable tramp, we think the first "box-office star" . . . the Charlie Chaplin of the arcades . . . was a plumber who helped to launch a thousand quarters, quests, multiple sub-franchises and a billion dollar industry: MARIO!

WOOT! A.K.A. WOW, LOOT!

Consumers in North America spent over \$21 billion on games at retail last year,¹ and that's just on traditional "games-in-a-box" played with game consoles and personal computers. Worldwide and across all platforms, including mobile and tablet games, the number has been estimated at

\$93 billion.² (We're not great with big numbers, but here's a comparison: for the same period, worldwide theatrical box office revenue was \$35.9 billion.³) Even though thousands of "free to play" games are available nowadays, passionate players are still willing to spend big on games that engage them.

Furthermore, *everyone plays video games now*. Think about that. Video games have been around for almost 50(!) years, and for much of that time games have been made for and played by teenage boys. But we play games at all ages now: Roughly a third of gamers are younger than 18, a little more than a third are older than 36, and the remaining third are in the 18–35 year range. And the gender breakdown is almost even: 48% female, 52% male.⁴

The audience for games has exploded in the last 10 years, with the advent of touch-screen smartphones and tablets, as well as easy-to-use download stores like Apple's App Store, Google Play, and Steam. And we can't forget Nintendo's million-unit-selling Wii console, whose groundbreaking wiggle stick controllers helped thousands of parents and grandparents to play video games—many for the first time. But while more people than ever are playing video games, not everyone identifies themselves as a "gamer." (And that's okay. We'll discuss this later on.)

With this huge and diverse audience playing games, some Cassandras are now foretelling the END OF HOLLYWOOD AS WE KNOW IT.

It is not. Video games (and interactive fiction) are merely the latest media for writers to use their storytelling skills. We have a generation that has grown up with games. The Xbox has replaced the cable box. Hollywood is not going anywhere, but neither are video games. We believe that—just as television learned from film and film learned from television—it is time to examine the similarities and differences between games and film as storytelling media. The new writers in Hollywood have grown up with games in their homes and in their

² <http://www.gartner.com/newsroom/id/2614915>

³ <http://boxofficemojo.com/news/?id=3805&p=.htm>

⁴ Entertainment Software Association, p. 3.

¹ Entertainment Software Association, *Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry 2014*, p. 13. http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/ESA_EF_2014.pdf

purses. From mobile to desktop, games are part of the pop culture conversation.

The emerging and the established writer in Hollywood—or who dreams of Hollywood, or dreams of storytelling anywhere in the world—should know how interactive narrative adds to the conversation and adds to the content.

A CRIMINALLY BRIEF HISTORY OF STORYTELLING TECHNOLOGY

Writers have always been drawn to new tech. From cave walls to the printing press—if there is a new way of delivering a story, storytellers will (usually) embrace it. Gutenberg’s press was first used to print the Bible, but many other works soon followed. As books grew less expensive over time, newspapers, magazines, and “dime novels” were even cheaper—as they were designed to be mass-produced and distributed as widely as possible. Charles Dickens—a master of serialized storytelling and therefore the great-grandfather of binge watching—delivered his novels one chapter at a time in cheap, disposable weekly or monthly magazines. Devoted fans of his work and his characters would bark at him as he walked through London: *What have you in store for poor Pip?*

When radio emerged as a mass medium, writers began scripting radio plays: comedies, mysteries, science-fiction, adventure, melodramas . . . you name it. Families gathered around the radio each night and listened to stories (and sometimes musical numbers). Orson Welles, who had made his name as a stage director, used this new medium in a legendary way when he staged H. G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* as a radio play, without telling the audience it was a play. America thought they were listening to a music program when the performance was interrupted with a special news report: Martians were invading the Earth via Grover’s Mill, New Jersey. Welles’s cleverly disguised narrative made use of then-familiar radio tropes to cause a national panic, if only for one night.

Remember those two names: Welles and Wells.

When film arrived around the turn of the twentieth century, it was a novelty. Early projections of trains coming into a station alarmed

viewers. Wanderers in penny arcades would put coins into kinetoscopes to watch what we would now think of as animated .GIFs. (*BioShock Infinite* uses a silent movie within the game to tell part of the story. The machine the player sees it on: a kinetoscope.)

But there were no *stories* on film . . . until very short fiction films began to appear, like Edwin S. Porter’s twelve-minute *The Great Train Robbery* (1903). Audiences (groups of people watching together, rather than the lonely experience of the kinetoscope) sat on benches or chairs in tents, or in theaters. Barely a dozen years later D. W. Griffith’s incredibly successful (and incredibly racist) *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) proved that longer, “feature-length” movies were a viable means of telling longer, more complex, and multi-threaded stories. Even silent movies needed writers (or “scenarists”). Someone had to conceive the plot and write the intertitles.

Movies came of age in 1939. This was the beginning of Hollywood’s golden age. Why 1939? The years 1939 to 1942 saw the release of a trove of classic films that continue to captivate viewers to this day:

Casablanca
Citizen Kane
Destry Rides Again
Gone with the Wind
Goodbye, Mr. Chips
The Maltese Falcon
Mr. Smith Goes to Washington
Ninotchka
Rebecca
The Rules of the Game (La règle du jeu)
The Wizard of Oz
Young Mr. Lincoln

Citizen Kane changed the medium. It set new expectations for cinematic storytelling. Its director? Orson Welles, the same boy wonder who created a national panic with his radio play.

Americans went to the movies in record numbers each week. But things change. Television landed in living rooms, so many moviegoers landed on the couch. Today, not as many Americans go to the movies as they did back then, but more of the world goes. Hence, Hollywood's appetite for computer generated imagery (CGI) and animation spectacles. KA-BOOM! and SPLAT! are understood worldwide.

Pick up any issue of any magazine that covers entertainment, eavesdrop at a table where writers hang out, look at the original programming offered by not only the broadcast and cable networks, but also Netflix, Amazon and other streaming providers, and you will hear this consensus: we are in a golden age of television. It has never been better. Broadband and binge watching have changed the way stories are told. Audiences love long-form serialized storytelling. Kind of like what Dickens used to do. (Then again, many big game franchises have been providing long-form episodic storytelling for, well, a lot longer than Netflix has.)

Television as a storytelling medium did not begin with a golden age. Mom and Dad America did not unwrap their TV dinners and enjoy *Breaking Bad* or *The Sopranos*. For decades, many TV shows were essentially radio programs with pictures. (Many very early TV shows, like *Father Knows Best* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, started out as radio programs.) TV's current golden age—with its nuanced, cinematic storytelling—took close to seventy-five years to get here. For decades, television was the most underappreciated and most often disparaged medium (besides comic books). Theater critic John Mason Brown famously called TV “chewing gum for the eyes.”⁵ It was unfashionable in smart circles to declare that you might actually enjoy watching television. Does that attitude seem familiar to those of us who love video games?

THE GOLDEN AGE OF GAMES?

We've come a long way from the bouncing ball that was *Pong*. We are now in a golden age of video game storytelling. Thankfully, the technology

has plateaued in recent years. In the last generation of high-def game consoles, you could see the nose hair growing out of the nostrils of the zombies that were about to kill you. In the current “next generation,” you can see individually animated legs on the mites on the nose hairs of the zombies that are about to kill you. For most game players, the most meaningful technological advancements of the last decade have been innovative controllers (via touch screens, cameras, plastic guitars, and wiggle sticks), better networking and, by far, the portability and ease of use provided by both smartphones and their app stores.

What's been so exciting about this is that so many creators have been able to focus on making more immersive and emotionally compelling stories with better gameplay, rather than having to spend so much time learning how to render graphics on totally new platforms. *Half-Life*, *Halo*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Fallout 3*, *BioShock*, *Uncharted*, *Mass Effect*, *The Last of Us*—all these landmark story-driven franchises have players returning again and again to experience the next chapter in the story; to explore more deeply these compelling worlds.

Although they're not “playable movies,” their graphics and sound are cinematic. Advances in motion capture and a thousand other bits of technology allow more realism and beauty. The worlds and story lines have attracted A-list Hollywood talent. Music tracks are no longer the ping-ping-ping of an 8-bit chip but sweeping symphonic scores. World building and mythology are unparalleled. What was the norm for the video game industry now has become a key point in every story conference for movies and television. The creators and narrative designers of these games—Ken Levine (*BioShock*), Susan O'Connor (*Tomb Raider*), David Cage (*Heavy Rain*) and many others—are treated like rock stars at game conferences.

Agents, managers, and writers talk about how a writer in today's world should know how to write it all: movies, novels, plays, articles, and “webisodes.” Even video games.

HOLLYWOOD CALLING!

Film and television industry executives have long been fascinated by video games. But, like many grown-ups, they've had a very hard time

5 1955 June 6, Time, Radio: Conversation Piece, Time Inc., New York. (Accessed time.com on September 12 2013; Online Time Magazine Archive)

understanding them. But if there's one thing blockbuster movies *and* games have in common, it's that their creators and distributors are always pursuing *The Big Idea*.

Hollywood loves The Big Idea. The high-concept one-liner. The story that gets butts in movie seats. The tantalizing “What If?” question that people pay you to answer. The IP that can feed the fans' insatiable appetite for sequels and spin-offs (and book tie-ins and toys and T-shirts). Every big media company wants nothing more than a franchise like *Star Wars*, in which the slightest announcement of new information or release of a new trailer can fill the halls at comic conventions and might even crash Twitter.

The appeal is twofold: for creators and fans, it's about the fun of exploring an exciting world and getting to know fascinating characters; for the suits, it's about the *money*! As Gus Grissom (actor Fred Ward) says in *The Right Stuff*, “No bucks, no Buck Rogers.”

The first modern American transmedia franchise was, arguably, *The Wizard of Oz* (and we don't mean the beloved 1939 MGM film—that came almost four decades later). L. Frank Baum wrote *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* in 1900. The book was a best-seller for years, and Baum wrote thirteen more novels based in the “merry old land of Oz.” He then brought the franchise to the stage as a musical play, which had a successful run on Broadway and toured the United States. In 1914 he expanded into movies with a series of silent films produced by his own Oz Film Manufacturing Company.⁶ There were spin-offs and merchandise (both licensed and unlicensed) for nearly *forty years* before audiences ever got to see Judy Garland wear her sequined ruby slippers.

All these journeys to Oz across multiple media made Baum a fortune. (He later *lost* a fortune, but that's a different story.) Audiences bought his books and tickets to his shows because they already knew of Oz and its characters, but wanted to know more. It was much easier for Baum to sell a new Oz-based book—for which there was an existing audience—than it was for him to sell a new book set in a different world. (He tried

many times with non-Oz stories.) The film studio and game publisher marketing executives call this “pre-awareness,” and it's the Holy Grail they're always pursuing.

Those pre-aware movie audiences love being taken to explore new locations within their favorite worlds, going on new emotional journeys with their favorite characters. The dramatic theory (according to Aristotle—more on him later) is that the audience empathically bonds with the main character, and as that *protagonist* changes, the audience comes to experience emotional change, or *catharsis*.

And all this happens when they are sitting—passively—in their movie seats. But we're not here to discuss *passive* entertainment; this book is about *interactive* entertainment.

WHY “SLAY THE DRAGON”?

With video games, players are in the driver's seat (sometimes literally, if it's a racing game like *Gran Turismo*). They are immersed—emotionally and physically—in the game. A hero in a movie might need to rescue the princess by slaying the big dragon, and we in the movie audience want to SEE him do it. But in a game, we the players want to slay the dragon and rescue the princess (or prince) through the vessel of the *player character* (PC). We also want plenty to do and see along the way. We're players; we want to play.

One of the axioms of dramatic writing is that *action is character*. If we see a character doing something, it defines who they are. But in video games, we're the ones driving the PC's actions. We're helping to define (and become) the character we control on the screen. These game *mechanics* are what the player gets to do in the game: Run. Jump. Shoot. Explore. Collect. Solve. Beat the Boss. *Be* the Boss. (More on all this later). They are motivated by story and quests and goals to pound the joystick, press X, Y. To lean forward and live in the story as the character would.

In the past, this was the most humbling thing for game writers to learn. Players are often not as interested in what happens in the story *you* have authored as they are in what happens in the story *they* are authoring themselves by playing the game. You, the writer, have to learn to tell your

⁶ Baum, L. Frank. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Oxford University Press, 2008.

story through the lens of PLAYER ACTION. If the player cannot succeed, the character does not succeed. But the times have changed: players and audiences want deeper content and characters they can connect to. Why do we see gamers jumping back to Liberty City any chance they get?

In his groundbreaking book on Hollywood screenwriting, *Save the Cat*, the late Blake Snyder showed us how important it is for us in the movie audience to invest emotionally in the hero. He called those scenes that make us begin to root for the movie hero the “*Save the Cat* scenes.” Video games have a very similar but more active principle: The players have to invest emotionally in the journey you’ve laid out for them.

The player wants to *slay the dragon*.

This is what the player cares about. The story has to involve the player. The player has to want to do and see cool things in the game world.

The game mechanics (such as dragon slaying) should enhance the story, and vice versa. They have to work in concert. We’ll guide you in the coming pages so you understand how to tell your story through the gameplay in an integrated fashion. Gameplay is like action scenes in movies. They have to be organic to the story line for the audience to suspend disbelief and enjoy the ride. The best games accomplish this fine alchemy between narrative and gameplay so that one enhances and reinforces the other (think of the big mid-game twist in *BioShock*). Your quest, outlined in the chapters to come, is to master that alchemy.

MEET YOUR QUEST GIVERS: BOB & KEITH

In video games, NPCs are the *non-player characters* who often guide the PC through the world. These digital sidekicks hand out missions and information to the PC. They are the quest givers, the rule enforcers, the explainers. (Think of Cortana, the Master Chief’s AI sidekick in *Halo*.) You know them in game worlds as mentors, vendors, barkeepers, passersby, teachers, and trainers. We are going to be your quest givers. We’re excited to explore with you this complex, awe-inspiring world of video game narrative.

We are not going to steal your virtual loot and sell it on eBay (though one of us knows how).

Our story begins in a 1920s apartment complex on Orange Grove Avenue in the heart of Los Angeles. If the story has a title, it’s *Aristotle vs. Mario*. It’s a branching narrative (which is something we’ll discuss later on when we talk about structure).

Bob and Keith had both recently graduated with master’s degrees from top film schools—the University of Southern California and New York University, respectively. They found themselves living two doors from each other, and became friends over Ethiopian food on Fairfax Avenue, too many Oki-Dogs, the L.A. Riots, and drives down to the San Diego Comic-Con (back when you could still find parking).

Keith’s path took him on the road to Hollywood. He co-wrote feature film scripts with his wife Juliet and was a working screenwriter for years.

Bob went to work in the video game business. He started at the bottom as game tester (think production assistant, mailroom clerk, or script reader). Bob quickly worked his way up the video game ladder, moving into product development and then becoming a studio director, serving as executive producer on dozens of games.

Bob spent hours playing all kinds of games, and way too much *World of Warcraft*. Keith would get schooled in *Halo* by his nephews. They continued to be friends, have dinners, go down to Comic-Con with professional passes, read comic books, and talk movies and games.

But even though they thought they were on divergent paths, their two worlds were gradually coming together. Xboxes and PlayStations were being marketed to adults, not just teens and parents. Kids who grew up playing video games were now working in the film business as writers, directors, and visual effects artists.

One year Bob took Keith to the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) at the Los Angeles Convention Center. (Think of it as the Cannes Film Festival for the video game industry.) It was Keith’s very first time, and he felt like Luke walking into the cantina at Mos Eisley, but with less danger and fewer loppings. Way more lightsabers, though.

Keith saw a giant world of entertainment and exciting story lines enjoyed by millions of people. The crowds were huge, rushing between

gigantic booths with stadium-sized screens set up by the game publishers and hardware makers: Activision. Ubisoft. Electronic Arts. Square-Enix. Xbox. PlayStation. Nintendo. The booths were lavishly designed, with characters from the games walking about for photo ops. The giant screens played the trailers for these games on continuous loop, their orchestral soundtracks booming throughout the halls: *Mass Effect*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Dragon Age*, *Final Fantasy*.

These games looked and felt like movies! The quality of the content was seductive. The computer animation was as good as watching the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. But more importantly, the stories that were up on the screen were inviting, begging to be seen. Film and games are no longer distant cousins, they are blood brothers. The South by Southwest (SXSW) Festival focuses on music, film, and games. The 2013 Tribeca Film Festival debuted footage from a game called *Beyond: Two Souls* “starring” Ellen Page and Willem Dafoe. Kevin Spacey (*House of Cards*’ Frank Underwood) plays the villain in a recent *Call of Duty*. Academy Award-winning composer Hans Zimmer wrote the music for *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2*.

The worlds have collided and the landscape of entertainment is bigger and teeming with possibilities. (Side note: the last time Bob and Keith went to E3, they accidentally wound up at a bar in the nearby Hotel Figueroa having cupcakes and beer with an adult film star, who was pitching her own game project. Our point is: everybody is getting into video games!)

Sure, movies have influenced games. *Uncharted* is an interactive Indiana Jones. *Tomb Raider* is a female Indiana Jones. In *Minecraft*, you are Indiana Jones.

But every relationship works two ways. Video games have also been influencing movies and books and television. Are we the only ones who thought the levels of the mind portrayed in *Inception* played out like video game levels?

The first blockbuster mainstream CD-ROM game was the classic *Myst*, about an island that contains lots of mysteries. Does that premise seem familiar to modern TV audiences? Here’s what *Lost* co-creator

Damon Lindelof had to say about the similarities:

For me certainly, the big game-changer was *Myst*. There’s a lot of that feeling in *Lost*. What made it so compelling was also what made it so challenging. No one told you what the rules were. You just had to walk around and explore these environments and gradually a story was told. And *Lost* is the same way.⁷

Booker Prize-winning novelist Sir Salman Rushdie used video games as a form of escapism during his years of hiding from Ayatollah Khomeini’s *fatwa*. He has said he is quite fond of Mario. Video game structure has influenced his storytelling. His novel *Luka and the Fire of Life* contains a main character, “Super Luka,” who is given 999 lives and has to pass through a number of “levels” to steal the fire of life and use it to wake his father from a coma. He remarked how non-linear narrative is fascinating for him to explore. “I think that really interests me as a storyteller,” he said, “to tell the story sideways.”⁸

SCREENWRITER MEETS GAME PRODUCER, FIGHT BREAKS OUT

Remember we said our story was branching? Let’s return to it. Keith continued to work as a film and television writer, but he always kept one eye open a little wider on what was happening in video games. Bob went on to executive produce more games. He was working on a game that had been mechanic-driven and was based on a toy company’s IP. The game world, though, seemed a little thin.

“I need a writer,” he said to Keith in the food court of the L.A. Convention Center. They were taking a break from a comic book show.

“For what?” Keith asked, his feet still aching from walking the picket lines for the then-in-progress Writers Guild strike.

⁷ http://entertainment.time.com/2007/03/19/lyst_cuse_and_lindelof_on_lost_1/ In the same article, he says “we have a lot of gamers on our writing staff.”

⁸ <http://www.theverge.com/2012/10/10/3482926/salman-rushdie-video-game-escapism-hiding>

“A game I’m producing. If you want to audition for it, I need you to write some barks for the NPCs.”

“Barks?” “NPCs?” Bob was speaking a language different from what Keith was used to hearing. (It’s a language we’ll teach you in the coming pages.) Keith asked a few questions, figured it out, wrote some barks and auditioned for the job of “narrative designer,” which is game-speak for “staff writer.” Then Keith went to work for Bob at a toy company writing video games.

Although they’d written and commented on each other’s work for years, this was the first time they worked together professionally. They got along very well, except when they would argue about the role that story should play in the game.

“It’s not a movie!”

“The character needs more of an arc!”

“Agency?!? What the heck is *that*?”

“The audience has to care! They have to be involved!”

“They’re *players*, not an audience!”

It was story points vs. game mechanics. It was Aristotle vs. Mario; drama vs. fun. They would spend hours discussing dramatic structure of movies and television and video games. What was the same? What was different? It was an ongoing education, from which they decided to create a course in game writing offered through the prestigious Writers’ Program at UCLA Extension.

Their very first class was a day-long seminar. They had no idea who, if anyone, would show up. It was on a sunny 75-degree Sunday in Westwood. Who’d want to sit in a room with Bob and Keith and learn about story structure, game mechanics, and barks?

But the classroom was packed. Every seat was taken. There were people who worked in game design and community management; there were screenwriters; there were aspiring game designers; and, most surprisingly, an A-list actress/producer and her husband/producing partner, himself a working TV actor. During a break Keith asked her, “Why are you taking this class?” She said it was because she knew this was an emerging

arena for storytellers and as a producer she wanted to know more.

Keith and Bob went on to expand the class to a full-semester course in the Writers’ Program at UCLA. Keith then moved east and now teaches the class at Syracuse University. Bob has taken the class to new heights, both teaching it online internationally and incorporating it into game production courses he creates at other schools.

They have seen their students enter the game industry armed with a deep understanding of how story works for games.

This is our goal for you, the reader of this book. To level up your abilities as a writer.

WHO NEEDS THIS BOOK?

We’re convinced that in order for them to succeed, today’s screenwriters *must* understand the interactive medium.

Many film directors working today openly acknowledge the influence video games have on their work. Listen to director Joe Cornish, discussing his movie *Attack the Block*:

“The monsters were kind of inspired by a SNES game called *Another World*, which was one of the first games to use motion capture,”

Cornish said. “It had some terrific creatures that were made out of silhouettes.” The idea of staging *Attack the Block*’s events in a single location was something else that, Cornish maintains, came from the realm of video games. It was, he said, a “unified space”—something commonly seen in first-person shooters.⁹

Dan Trachtenberg directed an original short film based on the video game *Portal*. It went viral, logging more than fifteen million views.¹⁰ He is now attached to direct the movie version of the comic book *Y: The Last Man* written by Brian K. Vaughn, a comic book writer and producer on *Lost*.

⁹ <http://www.denofgeek.us/movies/18632/the-growing-influence-of-videogames-on-movies>

¹⁰ <http://youtu.be/4drucg1A6Xk>

Warner Bros. scored a huge hit with *The Lego Movie*. Audiences have been playing with Lego for years. But in all the reviews (which were glowing) and discussions of the film's success, we noticed a complete lack of love for the Lego games. For years, people have been living in Lego worlds, not just with the toy bricks, but with the funny animated adventures that go along with playing any of the Lego games, including *Lego Indiana Jones*, *Lego Star Wars*, and *Lego Batman*. It's the Lego games of the last 10 years, made by English developer Traveller's Tales, which inspired *The Lego Movie*'s comic sensibility. The Lego movie only broke new ground in movie theaters. There was an audience of millions already familiar with that world. We were disappointed that film reviewers didn't acknowledge this.

Seizing on the success of the Lego movie, it's no wonder Warner Bros. has put *Minecraft* into accelerated development as a feature film franchise. To millions of people around the world it's already a franchise! A movie would be icing on a very big cake that has already been baked. (BTW, the creator of *Minecraft* was able to purchase a \$70 million home in Los Angeles. We guess you need a pretty big kitchen for that pretty big cake.)

Remember those story pitches that started this chapter? As we write this, they are all in development as motion pictures. Michael "Magneto" Fassbender is attached to star in *Assassin's Creed*. Ridley Scott's company is developing the *Halo* feature film. Although, as of this writing, it's stuck in "development hell," we fully expect to be on line the first day for the *BioShock* movie.

Assassin's Creed publisher Ubisoft has been compared to the next Marvel for raising money to develop its own properties for the big screen, including two games based on Tom Clancy novels-turned-game franchises: *Splinter Cell* (with Tom Hardy attached) and *Ghost Recon*.¹¹

Games are not just about games anymore. The worlds are colliding. Swirling around you. It can be very confusing. We're here to clear up the differences, to bridge the similarities, and to get you thinking about that alchemy!

We hope you find the ideas and exercises within to be a worthy quest. We wrote this book for you, if you are:

- a writer who wants to explore interactive storytelling,
- a writer who wants to understand the role of story in the game development process,
- a game writer (or gameplay designer) who wants to make your work more integrated and emotionally resonant with gameplay (and vice versa); or
- a passionate fan of story-driven video games.

At the end of each chapter are some Dragon Exercises. We encourage you to do them. Let us be your quest givers here to take you through world-building, character creation, branching narratives, and game mechanics (among many other topics).

It's time to begin your journey.

It's time to *slay the dragon*!

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK (PRESS X TO SKIP)

Movies (and television) and video games; video games and movies. This book is a bridge between those two types of media. Let's call them *linear narrative* and *interactive narrative*.

You may be very familiar with the material on linear narrative: character, conflicts, and all the other tenets of drama. But you might not know anything about game mechanics and gameplay. Or, you may be an avid game player—or game creator—who is familiar with gameplay but might not know about story structure. With that in mind, we have laid out some "choose-your-own-adventure" options to help guide you through the book. As much as we hate to skip over cut scenes, sometimes it happens. So we are providing you with a SKIP button here.

If You Are a Writer and Know a Little about Games

Most of this book is going to be new to you. Sure, you will be tempted to skip over

¹¹ <http://screenrant.com/video-game-movies-future/>

story and jump right to gameplay. But you want to make sure you read the story material also, for it is wildly different in interactive narrative.

Must-read chapters: *all of them!*

If You Are a Game Developer and Know a Little about Story

For a game dev, a chapter like “What’s in a Game?” may seem like a boot camp tutorial. So skip it. And you can probably skip over game mechanics. But don’t pass up story, or characters. Even level design has something to offer on how it applies to what keeps viewers in their seats—engaging content.

Must-read chapters:

2. Do Games Need Stories?
3. Aristotle vs. Mario
4. The No-Act-Fits-All Structure of Video Games
5. Writing a Great Playable Character
6. Who Am I When I Play? Gameplay as Method Acting
8. The Hero of a Thousand Levels
9. Building Your World with the Narrative Design Toolbox
12. What Happens Next?

If You Are a Film Producer or Creative Exec Looking for the Next Big Crossover IP

Everyone wants to be that genius at the studio who makes the video game movie (or TV show) work. So far it hasn’t. Why is that? We think you should read through the entire book to make your job easier. Bridge the two worlds together. You are not looking to break into the video game business, so you will probably skip most of the exercises as well.

Must-read chapters:

1. What’s in a Game?
2. Do Games Need Stories?
3. Aristotle vs. Mario
4. The No-Act-Fits-All Structure of Video Games
5. Writing a Great Playable Character
6. Who Am I When I Play? Gameplay as Method Acting
7. Game Design Basics for Writers
8. The Hero of a Thousand Levels
12. What Happens Next?

If You Teach and Use this as a Textbook

Everything in this book has been beta-tested in our classrooms. We have structured the book so you can use it to map out your semester. Each chapter contains exercises and projects that we have workshopped with our own students with great success. Our students have gone on to work in the video game field as writers, producers, testers, and even journalists.

Must-read chapters: *all of them!*

If You Are a Hobbyist and Want to Make Your Own Game

Read it all the way through from beginning to the end. (And don’t forget the exercises!)



DRAGON EXERCISES 00

Playing to Learn

AT THE END of each chapter we've suggested some exercises for you to do. This is not homework. This is fun. This is brainstorming, or getting your brain ready to be stormed with your great game idea(s).

1 START YOUR GAME JOURNAL

Games are meant to be played. Funny how simple that seems, but it is the truth. But now when you play a game, we want you to play with a more analytical eye. Start a Game Journal, and fill it with your reflections on and impressions of every game you play, good or bad. Record your thoughts during or shortly after the game.

2 PLAY A BOARD GAME

For your first entry, we want you to play a board game. But not a game that's sitting in the basement of Mom's house, or in your closet. Play a *new* board game—one that you've never played before.

Board games have enjoyed a renaissance over the last decade or so. Actor Wil Wheaton (*Star Trek: The Next Generation*) hosts a web series called "Table Top," which features celebrities and game industry veterans playing new board games.

But why do you need to play a board game?

The Writer will probably be the player who loves to read the backstory that might come with the instructions; or really like the world as described on the back of the box. But board games are a great way for writers to start thinking about game design. As Writers play board

games, they should ask: What are the rules? What are the obstacles? Are there rewards and achievements? Setbacks? How is the game structured? This is not a book about balancing gameplay based on statistics and math. It's a book on game story. But as Writers will soon learn, story and gameplay go together. How does the gameplay in the board game reflect its story or world?

The Gamer probably knows all about the gameplay. He or she will be able to see the framework of the game the way a screenwriter would see story structure. So the Gamer needs to play a new board game and concentrate on the story—the world—of the game. Who are the characters? How are they represented? What is the story line? What is the goal of the characters, and is that different from the goal(s) of the players? How is the world of the game conveyed to the player?

Play a game and in one page describe the world of the story, the plot, and the game play. Record your impressions in your Game Journal.

Some board games that are well worth playing if you haven't tried them are:

Battlestar Galactica

King of New York

Myth

Quantum

Puerto Rico

Settlers of Catan

Sheriff of Nottingham

Ticket to Ride

If you're still stumped as to what to try, there are plenty of great suggestions at www.boardgamegeek.com.

3 PLAY A VIDEO GAME

(We realize this may be stunningly obvious.)

Way too many games; way too little time. Keith tells his screenwriting students to watch all of the films on the American Film Institute's

list of the “100 Greatest American Films of All Time.” Well, aspiring game writers need to do the same sort of thing. However, there is no definitive list of the top 100 games, although many lists agree on many great games. Many game magazines and web sites publish such lists periodically. But you as a writer should focus on the more story-driven games. (*Pong* is, after all, simply *Pong*.) Although many classic games have been “remastered” for play on modern systems ranging from PCs to smartphones, not every old game ages well.

Play games that have been recognized in the last five years or so for their engaging stories or immersive worlds. Play games on a computer, on a console, on a smartphone or tablet. Play indie games. Download and play trial and demo versions. Play games in various game genres to get the feel of how they work. Play a sports game like *FIFA* or *NBA 2K*. (Yes, these do have stories.)

Play best-sellers, critics’ darlings, and award winners. Although the games industry does not yet have its “Academy Awards,” it’s worth paying attention to any such list. Some of the story-driven nominees and winners of The Game Awards 2014 included:

Bravely Default
Broken Age: Act I
Divinity
Dragon Age: Inquisition
Middle-earth: Shadow of Mordor
South Park: The Stick of Truth
The Vanishing of Ethan Carter
The Walking Dead, Season Two
The Wolf Among Us
This War of Mine
Valiant Hearts: The Great War
Wolfenstein: The New Order

We also recommend in our classes games from the following list, in which we find the narrative, characters, or world very compelling, and

gameplay organic to the story line. They are also interactive narratives that we feel make the best use of the tools of video game writing.

Assassin’s Creed franchise
Beyond Good & Evil
BioShock
BioShock Infinite
Braid
Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons
Deus Ex franchise
Fallout
Fallout 3
Final Fantasy VII
God of War
Half-Life
Halo franchise
Heavy Rain
Ico
Journey
The Last of Us
Mass Effect franchise
Portal
Portal 2
The Stanley Parable

(Please don’t freak out if your favorite game isn’t on the list. This is a short list, and is by no means definitive. We only present it here as a jumping-off point for you to begin to explore story-driven games.)

Play a game and in one page describe the world, the plot, and the gameplay. Record your impressions in your Game Journal.

CHAPTER 01

WHAT'S IN A GAME?

A GAME IS NOT A MOVIE, and a movie is not a game.

No one decides to go out for the evening to watch a game; and we can't imagine a scenario where friends text each other: SUP? U WANNA PLAY A MOVIE?

It makes no sense. How can you play a movie? You watch a movie. How do you see a game? You play a game. (Although Amazon's billion dollar purchase of Twitch.tv is the latest evidence that video games are becoming something you *watch* as well—a spectator sport.¹²)

Games and movies are two distinct media. Filmed entertainment (movies, TV, scripted Internet videos—anything written for a screen) and video games are at once incredibly similar and totally different. But as these two storytelling platforms align more and more, certain conventions from the one have begun to influence the other. Two of the best recent video game movies were not based on actual video games. *Edge of Tomorrow* and *Snowpiercer* are both movies that feature video game tropes which may or may not be recognizable to the non-game-playing audience.

So what exactly do we mean by “video game”?

WHAT WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT GAMES

Let's get the easy part out of the way: “Video” means, effectively, “played on a screen using a computer.” That computer may be in your mobile phone, your game console, or your laptop. But we like to use “video games”

12 <http://www.forbes.com/sites/ryanmac/2014/08/25/amazon-pounces-on-twitch-after-google-balks-due-to-antitrust-concerns/>

to cover all computer games. Fair? Good. We'll generally be talking about digital (computer) games throughout the book. We have mad respect for the writing and world building that goes into so many popular “analog” (table-top) games, but, frankly, Bob still hasn't learned to play *Settlers of Catan*, so we'll usually be talking about video games. But not always.

The hard part—defining “game”—is a lot harder, especially since the ludologists got involved. (Ludology is the academic study of games and gameplay.) We are in a very evolving period of time as a debate rages about what exactly is a game.

Legendary designer Sid “*Civilization*” Meier said that “games are a series of interesting decisions.”¹³

Respected ludologist Jesper Juul said that a “game is a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable.”¹⁴

Iconoclastic indie developer and critic Anna Anthropy wrote that a game is defined as “an experience created by rules.”¹⁵

For our purposes, we like Ms. Anthropy's definition the best, as it's the least limiting, most versatile, and shortest.

But what are some of the core aspects of a game? And are any of these characteristics also found in other storytelling media like films or television?

Goals and Obstacles

Games have goals. Classic board games expressed this as “The Object of the Game” printed at the top of the instructions. In order to make those goals challenging, games have obstacles. From a pawn blocking a pawn

13 http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/164869/GDC_2012_Sid_Meier_on_how_to_see_games_as_sets_of_interesting_decisions.php

14 Juul, Jesper. 2005. *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. Ebook. 1st ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, loc 400.

15 Anthropy, Anna. 2012. *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Dropouts, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*. Ebook. 1st ed. New York, NY: Seven Stories Press., Loc. 939.

in a game of chess to Jail in *Monopoly* or backtracking down a chute in *Chutes and Ladders*, there will always be obstacles to impede the progress of the player.

Drama in any form must have obstacles and conflict. If Odysseus had used Google Maps, the *Odyssey* would have been a lot shorter and way less interesting.

Characters

“I want to be the top hat!” Have you ever heard this? It can happen any time a group sits down to play *Monopoly*. Games often have characters that are “acted” by the players during the gameplay. Remember *Clue*? We humans have a way of identifying with (and as) other people (real or fictional), animals, and plants (see *Plants vs. Zombies*)—even inanimate objects, like *Monopoly*’s top hat. Even colors. Growing up, Bob always wanted to play as black in checkers. He thought black was smarter and cooler than red or white.

The play has a character (or “avatar”) who is—for the player—the protagonist of the story. There must also be antagonists. These can be other players, or computer controlled villains—obstacles that move and act and have cool dialogue.

Settings (or the Game World)

When you sit down to play a game, the game maker provides the dramatic context. The world. The setup. Building the world is the first step to creating an immersive experience for the player. Where does the game take place? The historic Atlantic City of *Monopoly*? The imaginary island of Catan? The nineteenth century United States of *Ticket to Ride*? Even such “simple” board games as *Stratego*, *Battleship*, and *Risk* show us a world—namely, combat in the field, at sea, and on a global scale. (By the way, where the heck did the aliens in the *Battleship* movie come from? They weren’t in our game box!)

Competition

Competition is a huge component of gameplay. Players compete against

each other, or the game, or both, to win. In single-player video games, players play against the game system, but they may also be playing against the entire world when it comes to online leaderboards and achievements. Scripted drama consists largely of us watching a “competition” and rooting for the “good guy,” be they Othello, Atticus Finch, or Katniss Everdeen.

And, perhaps most importantly:

Rules

Games have rules. It’s the first thing participants discuss when starting a game. Someone will explain the rules. How to move. What the cards mean. How to win.

Movies and TV shows also have rules. Drama has rules. Characters must be motivated. Clues must be planted. Conflict must be resolved somehow. When stories deviate from these rules, we often find them unsettling, unsatisfying, or a Lars von Trier film.

Rules matter in games. Yes, there are some games where you *play without rules*. These are games you might have played at the playground in a sandbox as a kid. (Remember that word: sandbox.) Peek-a-Boo. Ring Around the Roses. Make-believe games like House or Dinosaurs. But on the same playground you might have kids playing games where they have to **play with rules**. Hide and Seek. Duck, Duck, Goose. Four Square (the ball game, not the app). All sports and card games.

And of course, board games.

So what is a rule? Think of it like an “if-then” statement. *If* I do or accomplish this, *then* this other thing will happen. It could be a reward or a setback. Simply put, when playing a *Call of Duty* or a *Battlefield*:

If I fall on a grenade, *then* I will die.

At some point during a board game, players might have to refer to the rule book or instruction manual. Computers are awesome because they automate the rules, making them close to invisible. The computer rolls the dice, does the math (physics and calculus) instantly, keeps score, and

referees. The computer tracks changes in the game's state (positions, statistics, achievements, etc.). Imagine having someone at the table on game night doing all that. In so many games, the computer is your Dungeon Master, without the sarcasm or the onion-ring breath. Because the computer is running the game, the player can stay immersed in the world of the game. Finally, when it's time for more of the story, the computer plays that content flawlessly, every time.

However, games are not only about the experience created by the rule systems. They're about the story also. Stories have rules as well. Just think of all the rules associated with opening the lost Ark, or using the Force? Or how someone can awaken from a dream in *Inception*. Players (and characters) make choices that affect outcomes, and those outcomes affect further choices the player can make. It's a feedback loop: Rules create consequences. Consequences create feelings. Those feelings affect the player's next actions, and those actions are again judged by the rules. And so on, tens of thousands of times per play session.

Think about the emotions you feel when you are playing a game and have to GO DIRECTLY TO JAIL. Or when you finally solve the puzzle that's been thwarting your progress. Or when you find that one hidden item that will complete your quest. Our goal as game writers is to use those feelings to deepen the narrative experience for the player. This is the storytelling alchemy that games can possess—a combination of gameplay and narrative.

We'll explore story further in the next chapter, but for now, let's say that a story is a **journey of emotion**. If that's true, and we feel it is, then it's useful to think of a game as a **journey of action**.

A GAME IS A JOURNEY OF ACTION

What action? Everything: the action the player takes, the resulting action that the game system (or an opposing player) takes, then the resulting subsequent actions that the players take, etc.

Game mechanics are the actions that a player can take in a game. They are the “verbs” of the game. Gameplay designers are always thinking about what the players can do in a level, just as screenwriters are

always thinking about what the characters are doing in a scene. What makes sense? What's challenging? What's too easy or too boring?

Here's a brutally incomplete list of some common game mechanics, with some example games. Think about games that you've played recently, or your favorites. Which mechanics do you recognize from this list? Which are missing?

Moving

This can cover a lot, like **running** at a fixed speed (*Temple Run*, *Canabalt*) or **accelerating** and **decelerating**, often while **steering** (*Pole Position*, *Project Gotham Racing*). You might be **jumping** (*Super Mario Bros.*) and **ducking** (*Super Mario Bros. 3*) to avoid obstacles or to reach platforms. You can move to pursue or to avoid, **fleeing** enemies (*Pac-Man*) or **chasing** them (powered-up *Pac-Man*).

Exploring

This might be **seeking** a hidden switch in a room (*Myst*, *The Room*) or a more general **exploring** of a level or a world to discover its wonders (*World of Warcraft*). You could be **collecting** things (*Pokémon*, *Lego Star Wars*) or **gathering** resources (*Minecraft*). If someone is searching for you, then perhaps you should think about **hiding** (*Metal Gear Solid*).

Planning

This is a broad one, as it can include **managing** (*SimCity*, *Roller Coaster Tycoon*), **strategizing** (*Civilization*, *Rise of Nations*), or simply **buying** and **selling** (*The Sims*, franchise mode in *Madden*). You may be **choosing** which weapon or power-up to use (*Angry Birds*, *Mario Kart*), **arranging** gems or other things (*Bejeweled*, *Puzzle Quest*), or **allocating** cards in your deck or points to your character (*Magic: The Gathering* or *Mass Effect*).

Fighting

This can include **attacking** and **defending** in individual hand-to-hand combat (*Street Fighter*, *Tekken*), on the squad level (*Final Fantasy Tactics*)

or as a clash of armies (*StarCraft*, the *Total War* series). Although some games feature intimate **stabbing**, both more secretive (*Assassin's Creed*) and less (*Chivalry: Medieval Warfare*), by far the most popular form of combat in video games is **shooting**. Whether the shooting is done from a side view (*R-Type*), a top-down view (*Asteroids*), an over-the shoulder view (*Gears of War*), or a first-person view (*Quake*, *Unreal*, *Halo* and so many others), players love to point at a target, press a button, and let the simulated physics fall where they may.

Timing

This is another broad one, as it can include **volleying** the ball in *Pong* or *Breakout*, **matching** your steps or strums to the beats in *Dance Dance Revolution* or *Guitar Hero*, or **swinging** your club in *Hot Shots Golf*.

We warned you this list is brutally short. What have we missed? We'll dig deeper into this in Chapter 07: Game Design Basics for Writers.

Remember that many games, and very many story games, tend to combine several mechanics, either simultaneously or in phases. In the *Grand Theft Auto* games you race sometimes, you shoot sometimes, and sometimes you shoot while racing. In *Sid Meier's Pirates!* you sword fight, sail, and trade, amongst other piratey activities.

Understanding a game's mechanics is crucial to where it is placed, both on the retail shelf and in the minds of game players, because historically, that's how we think of game genres.

GAME GENRE VS. STORY GENRE

Stories are journeys of emotion. We tend to group movies and television—along with novels and plays—by the emotions they evoke (comedy, horror, romance, etc.).

Games are journeys of action, however. We tend to group games by their core mechanics (racing, shooting, role-playing, etc.). Players who enjoy a certain mechanic tend to look for other games with the same mechanics they enjoy, just as people who enjoy mystery novels look for more mysteries to read. That's why retailers often put *Halo* and *Call of Duty* on the same shelf. Even though one is a space opera and the other

is an urban combat simulator, they share the same core mechanic: point-and-click shooting. But just because we group games by their mechanics doesn't mean that story isn't important to our enjoyment of games. The story should complement the mechanics of the genre and vice versa. It all comes together during the development and production of the game. With that in mind, we want to touch on how video games are actually made.

HOW DO THEY MAKE GAMES? WHO'S THE DIRECTOR?

Movies have directors. They're the ultimate boss on a film set; they are responsible for managing all the creative and technical departments so that the hundreds of people who work on the film are executing toward bringing the director's coherent creative vision to the movie.

The movie-making process developed in Europe and America over a century ago, and its customs and practices—its industry culture—is very deeply rooted. It would be hard to imagine a film without a director, and we have a long tradition of genius-level *auteurs* (Welles, Hitchcock, Bergman, Fellini, Kubrick, . . .).

Games do not have directors, per se. They sometimes have creative directors, or design directors, or occasionally you'll see a "directed by" or "game director" credit on large projects or some Japanese games, but the term is rare. There may be a person (say, the "Director of Game Design") who owns the creative vision of the game, but he is always working with the producer (responsible for the schedule and budget) and the technical director (or lead programmer, responsible for the coding), as well as the other department heads (art, audio, marketing, live team, testing, community managers, etc.) to balance their creative vision against the other resources (Time! Money!) that are running short on the project.

The process of making computer games emerged four decades ago in Japan, America, and Europe, and each region's game development culture is a little different. In America, the game development process still often reflects the well-established process of "grown-up" software development—banking, medicine, aviation—that arose in the 1960s and '70s. There, the clients (represented by marketing) often dictated their needs or creative vision, which was mediated by a project manager, who

then “managed” teams of programmers, who wrote the software. (If it seems “Dilbert”-y, it is.)

Fortunately, game development can be a lot more democratic, in the sense that managing the entire team (which is done by producers or project managers, not a director) relies a lot more on consensus building—and horse trading—than orders dictated through a megaphone by an auteur in a canvas chair. There is often a “blue sky” period very early on in the conception phase. No good (or bad) idea goes unexpressed.

Blue sky is the honeymoon period of creativity. Anything is possible. Creators meet, brainstorm, spitball. They might be producers, designers, and writers who work from this mantra: If we can have anything in the world in our game, what might it be? Blue sky starts the collaborative process and differs greatly from the screenplay-driven, authorial process of Hollywood. Sure, the creative producer of the game will reject most ideas—but the ideas will be heard.

There are, of course, a few video game auteurs who work like, and have fans like, film directors: Hideo Kojima (*Metal Gear Solid*), Sid Meier (*Civilization*), Will Wright (*SimCity*, *The Sims*), Tim Schafer (*Grim Fandango*), and Ken Levine (*BioShock*), among a few others. But they remain the exception rather than the rule.

WHERE DO GAME IDEAS COME FROM?

When Bob was working as a game tester at Mattel, he thought he had a great idea for a game: Mattel should resurrect its then moribund “Masters of the Universe” IP and make a hardcore action game aimed at the then 20- and 30-year-olds who grew up playing with He-Man and Skeletor. Because it was aimed at a mature audience, Bob envisioned the game as a gritty, noir take on He-Man. Skeletor had years ago conquered Castle Greyskull. He-Man had been stripped of his Sword of Power and had been banished to hard labor in a forgotten astro-mine. Bob pulled together an ad hoc group of artists and producers (who often doubled as gameplay designers) from the studio and pitched them his idea over lunch.

“We open up with three of He-Man’s buddies huddled around

a campfire. They’re leaderless, oppressed, and homeless. One starts to sing . . .” and then Bob launched into a song he’d written that would cover the action in the first cut scene.

“Wait a minute,” a producer said. “Is this a *game* you’re pitching? What do I get to do?”

“Well, fight your way out of the mines and re-take Castle Greyskull.”

“Fine, that’s the story—but what do I get to *do*?”

Bob had figured that details like gameplay could be sorted later. He was wrong.

His experience was typical for screen and fiction writers who move into game writing. It’s a very sobering realization that you, the writer(s), are never the prime creator of a game. Fledgling game writers get told almost daily, “we can’t do that,” by producers or programmers. A simple idea like “let’s make our hero swim!” can have a huge impact on the schedule and budget of a game, because implementing that suggestion would require the time and money involved to create entirely unanticipated models, textures, and animation trees. The sad irony is that for an interactive medium, it is often very difficult in video game development to adapt on the fly in the middle of a project.

That’s the bad news. And it is also looking in the rear-view mirror. The good news is that more than ever, developers at every level need good writers to compete in the marketplace as the medium—and the audience—grows more sophisticated and discriminating. We are just beginning to unlock the potential of video games as a form of artistic self-expression.

Although game concepts traditionally have been driven by technology and game mechanics, this is changing. The idea for *The Last of Us* did not come from the mechanics. It came from the mind of the writer/co-director Neil Druckmann. He wanted to develop a game version of the iconic zombie movie *Night of the Living Dead*. Unable to get the rights, he came up with his own—a mash-up of *Night of the Living Dead* and the classic PlayStation 2 game *Ico*.¹⁶ Druckmann made the idea his

16 The Making of “The Last of Us” - Part 1: A Cop, A Mute Girl and Mankind, <http://youtu.be/Fbpvzq-pfjc>, retrieved January 20, 2015.

own, blending story and game mechanics in a way that resulted in a game-changing game.

THE NARRATIVE DESIGNER

The process of video game production suffers when a writer is brought in late to the project to assemble all the assets and make something that is cohesive. A narrative designer might be brought into the project early. On his blog *The Narrative Design Explorer*, “transmedia story designer and interactive design evangelist” Stephen Dinehart¹⁷ put together one of the best job descriptions we’ve seen of the role and responsibilities of a narrative designer. He wrote that:

The Narrative Designer will focus on ensuring that the key elements of the player experience associated with story and storytelling devices, script and speech are dynamic, exciting and compelling.

A job title has emerged recently that’s often junior to narrative designer: content designer. But whatever it’s called, we hope that you will one day soon be working for (running, perhaps?) the game developer of your choice.

But let’s learn to crawl before we fly. Let’s break things down all the way to their fundamentals.

Let’s talk about story. See you in the next chapter.

¹⁷ <http://narrativedesign.org/about/>



DRAGON EXERCISES 01

Making A Game

1 WRITE YOUR OWN GAME

In this exercise, gameplay will be locked, and it’s up to you to make the game as interesting as possible using only the tools of storytelling. The game is a simple dice race:



1. Two players
2. One six-sided die
3. Both players start on the same space (#1). Taking turns, each player rolls the die and moves their token one to six spaces around the board.